

Tips on Preserving Your Documents

by Nancy Kraft and Ivan Hanthorn, for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Tip #1—Don't Laminate. Laminating your important documents and treasured keepsakes is a damaging procedure. Although the tough material used in the lamination process may seem like a solution, it actually accelerates the chemical aging of documents and other paper items. The lamination process uses harmful adhesives and heat to permanently bond the document to the plastic. The damaging effects of this irreversible procedure are not immediately apparent but will show with passage of time. Use encapsulation or archival quality containers instead of lamination for document protection.

Tip #2—Photo Sleeves. Enclosing your photographs and documents in archival quality transparent sleeves will make them both visually enjoyable and protected. Suitable enclosures are made of polypropylene, Mylar™ polyester, or polyethylene [not polyvinyl-chloride (PVC)], which are chemically stable materials free of additives and surface coatings. If your items are fragile, include a piece of acid-free board or acid-free folder stock for support. Archival quality paper envelopes are also acceptable for long-term storage of photographic prints and negatives.

Tip #3—Archival Products. If the next generation is to enjoy your keepsakes, then you need to use archival-quality storage materials. Archival materials are becoming easier to find. Several mail order companies stock materials for storing everything from books to photos and wedding dresses to baseball cards. Archival products can sometimes be found at your local photocopy, stationary, or art supply store.

If you have questions about this tip sheet or other preservation topics, contact:



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Tip #4—Environment. Store important items in the best environment available. Keep documents and paintings out of direct sunlight. If possible, avoid shelving books against outside walls, where condensation may form and harm your books. Also avoid storing valuable materials in basements or attics, where extremes in temperature and humidity may occur. An air-conditioned room with north or east windows is a good location for books and keepsakes.

Tip #5—Copies. It's best to display a copy and safely store the original. You can photocopy your entire scrapbook or historical documents and share with friends and not worry about tearing or spilling on the original.

Tip #6—Reversibility. The rule of thumb in all preservation efforts is if it's not reversible (like laminating), it's not a good preservation practice. Any good practice will let you undo what you've done – in case technology changes or you change your mind about storage.

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